

**Briefing Note**

# Navigating conflicting memories: Reconciliation initiatives to engage the Yezidi population in Iraq require an urgent overhaul

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## Purpose

August 2024 will mark the 10th anniversary of crimes perpetrated by Islamic State (IS) against the Yezidi minority in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In just a few days, IS killed or abducted around 10,000 Yezidis, including the rape and enslavement of thousands of women and girls.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, these crimes were recognised as an act of genocide by the UN investigation team<sup>3</sup> and by Iraq's new Yezidi [Female] Survivors Law.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years on, many Yezidis remain sceptical about the credibility of reconciliation efforts. Underlying this scepticism and Yezidi attitudes towards the ethnic and sectarian “other” are long-standing memories of systemic discrimination and stigmatisation that pre-date the IS era. These sentiments are compounded by Yezidi suspicions that fellow Iraqi nationals – particularly formerly trusted Sunni neighbours from Arab tribes in Sinjar – were complicit in atrocities committed by IS and al-Qaeda. The Yezidis recognise that some compatriots were coerced into obedience and did not condone

or participate in the terrorist groups' violence, but this knowledge struggles against a backdrop of historic persecution and trauma. Addressing these memories and inherited, cross-generational perceptions of stigmatisation and discrimination is a matter of urgency: if left untreated, they will continue to exacerbate Yezidi perspectives and feelings of alienation from the Iraqi state and its polity.

Drawing on first-hand interviews with Yezidi communities from Sinjar and Sheykhani, along with diaspora voices, this briefing note outlines key research findings on barriers to reconciliation. It examines the challenges of designing effective reconciliation projects and dialogue initiatives to engage the Yezidi population in Iraq. Finally, it offers considerations for practitioners, policymakers, and donor organisations. These highlight the importance of identifying historical narratives and addressing deeply rooted memories that continue to shape community perspectives today.

1 The Yezidis are a closed ethno-religious minority living in Iraqi Kurdistan in northwest Iraq, as well as in northwest Syria and southeast Turkey.  
2 Reuters, 'Nearly 10,000 Yazidis killed, kidnapped by Islamic State in 2014, study finds', 9 May 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-yazidis-idUSKBN18527I/>, accessed 21 May 2024.  
3 UN News, 'ISIL crimes against Yezidis constitute genocide, UN investigation team finds', May 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1091662>, accessed 13 March 2024.  
4 Coalition for Just Reparations, 'YEZIDI SURVIVORS' LAW (YSL)', <https://c4jr.org/ysl/>, accessed 10 March 2024.

# Key findings and policy implications

- ▶ Yezidis in Iraq continue to grapple with enduring and systemic discrimination, repression, hate speech, stereotyping, and exclusion that predates IS oppression.
- ▶ The perceived betrayal of the Yezidis by trusted neighbours and friends within Sunni Arab communities has heightened their feelings of insecurity and alienation, against a backdrop of already low expectations concerning the law and the state's commitment to their well-being.
- ▶ Cross-generational memories, ranging from systemic repression to recent betrayals, significantly shape the Yezidis' mistrust and scepticism about the effectiveness of peace and reconciliation interventions.
- ▶ Rebuilding Yezidi trust and forging genuine connections between communities will require acknowledgment of historical injustices and a commitment by the Iraqi government and religious authorities to counter deeply ingrained prejudices.
- ▶ Facilitated discussions within different communities about contentious historical events can help mitigate re-traumatisation and avoid spurring new tensions between groups. Locally led, inter-group dialogue structured around shared interests has been effective in spurring constructive engagement.
- ▶ The Yezidi Survivors Law was an important step towards transitional justice – but the credibility of justice and reconciliation efforts hinges on greater accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in its implementation.
- ▶ Societal discrimination against Yezidis remains rooted in ignorance and misunderstandings about Yezidi culture and beliefs. Revising school curricula and organising cultural exchanges could help forge understanding between communities.
- ▶ The contentious Sinjar Agreement leaves Yezidi residents caught in tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the federal government, and myriad paramilitaries, with little influence on the fate of their homeland.
- ▶ With continuing insecurity and few structures in place to support reintegration in Sinjar, there is a perceived hypocrisy to European calls for Yezidis to return.

The following sections provide greater detail on each of these findings and considerations.

# Key findings

## 1. Yezidis in Iraq continue to grapple with enduring and systemic discrimination, repression, hate speech, stereotyping, and exclusion that predates IS oppression.

*“Yezidis, by the way, are survivors of 72 genocides in history. Most of these massacres and genocides occurred in the time of the Ottoman Empire, particularly after the 17th century.”<sup>5</sup>*

This statement by Mirza Dinnayi, a human rights activist and founder of the House of Coexistence peacebuilding centre in the Yezidi heartland of Sinjar in northern Iraq<sup>6</sup>, highlights the long history of persecution faced by the Yezidis. Dating back to the Ottoman era, this persecution has focused particularly on their stigmatisation as alleged ‘devil worshippers’, Dinnayi explains. In the 16th century, the Mufti of the Ottoman Empire, Abu al-S’ud al-’Amadi al-Kurdi, issued a fatwa against the Yezidis that accused them of worshipping the devil. This effectively legitimised the killing and enslaving of Yezidis, as well as the plundering of their properties and occupation of their lands.

Against the backdrop of systemic exclusion and discrimination, the renowned Yezidi hero Ezidi Mirza achieved a noteworthy but short-lived triumph in 1649, when he was appointed governor of Mosul by the Grand Vizier Kara Murad Pasha. However, his tenure faced swift opposition due to religious bias, as Dinnayi highlights:

*“Just because he was a Yezidi, every single Mullah and Imam in Mosul, and every single agha and powerful man in Mosul, reported to the Topkapi, to the Bab al-Ali<sup>7</sup> against him and they wanted to change him, because they didn’t accept him as a Yezidi.”*

Dinnayi contends that entrenched biases against the Yezidi community, coupled with the perceived unwillingness of Mosul’s residents to embrace outsiders, effectively hindered Yezidis from attaining significant roles in the city until 2003.

Iraq’s new constitution of 2005 guaranteed the Yezidis certain religious rights as a minority group. However, discriminatory practices and lingering resentful attitudes persisted, perpetuating their sense of victimhood and marginalisation. For example, Dinnayi says that if a Yezidi spouse, whether the husband or wife, opts to convert to Islam while living as a married couple with children, Iraqi law mandates the automatic conversion of the children to Islam, regardless of whether the mother or the father converted. Moreover, the children are not granted the autonomy to choose to remain Yezidis; until they reach the age of 18, they are obligated to follow the religion of the converted parent, be it the mother or the father. Only upon reaching adulthood can the children make an independent decision regarding their religious affiliation.

Discriminatory practices prioritising Islam also affect inheritance among the Yezidis. For example, if a family member converts to Islam, the non-converted relatives – be they Yezidi, Christian, or Mandaean<sup>8</sup> – are denied any share of the deceased’s estate. In the scenario where the father converts to Islam and passes away, all inheritance exclusively goes to family members who had embraced Islam. The children and spouse who maintain their Yezidi, Christian, or Mandaean beliefs receive no portion of

5 Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from interviews with the author.

6 Ammar Aziz, ‘Shingal’s House of coexistence brings together ethno-religious communities’, 26 July 2022, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/68530>, accessed 21 May 2024.

7 “Topkapi” which in Turkish means “Gate of Cannons” refers to the political heart of the Ottoman empire and home to the highest decision-making power, Samed Kurban, cf. “Topkapi Palace as a Moral and Political Institutional Structure in the Ottoman Palace Organization,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 7 (3), March 2017, [https://www.ijhss-net.com/journals/Vol\\_7\\_No\\_3\\_March\\_2017/12.pdf](https://www.ijhss-net.com/journals/Vol_7_No_3_March_2017/12.pdf), accessed 21 May 2024.

8 Mandaism is an ancient closed ethno-religious group following a Gnostic, monotheistic religion, with Greek, Iranian, and Jewish influences. Mandaeans live in Iraq, Iran, and the diaspora.

the inheritance. Conversely, if a child converts to Islam and the father passes away, the converted individual child everything. As Danniya explains:

*“there are many injustices in this regime in Iraq against the minorities. And the Yazidis are actually the most affected minority in Iraq regarding this lack of respect vis-à-vis their religion.”*

The geographical location of the Yazidis’ ancestral homeland in Sinjar, in Nineveh governorate in northern Iraq, is also a major factor in their

marginalisation. As the journalist Alannah Travers told the author in an interview, Sinjar has long been regarded as the territory of an underserved minority group, enduring decades of neglect in terms of public services, employment opportunities, and overall development.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Sinjar’s strategic location close to the Syrian and Turkish borders renders it vulnerable to trafficking routes leading to Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey.<sup>10</sup> This vulnerability is further exacerbated by a lack of effective governance, external military incursions, and geopolitical tensions.

## **2. The perceived betrayal of the Yazidis by trusted neighbours and friends within Sunni Arab communities has heightened their feelings of insecurity and alienation, against a backdrop of already low expectations concerning the law and the state’s commitment to their well-being.**

Despite their general scepticism about the state’s commitment to addressing Yazidi grievances, the Yazidis had maintained a harmonious relationship with their Sunni Arab neighbours in the Sinjar area, enjoying a sense of mutual respect and cooperation.

This shared history and long-standing communal ties are precisely why, in the eyes of many Yazidis, they felt gravely betrayed when some of their Arab neighbours abandoned or failed to support them when the Yazidis faced the existential threat of IS. The ancient tradition of ‘karif / kiruv,’ referring to the Abrahamic-like practice of circumcision, illustrates this point. According to the karif tradition, Yazidis are obliged to identify a trusted person – the karif / kiruv – from outside their religion or caste to act as a witness to the circumcision and be a “brother of life” to their family. In return, as Danniya told the author, the Yazidis would view this figure as a member of their own family and would be ready to sacrifice their lives to protect him and his family:

*“So you can imagine how Yazidis are dealing with the relationship – how the Yazidis who were making even a social relationship with the Muslims, with the Arabs, on this top religious level, and at the same time, witnessing how in 2014, some of these karifs attacked their families, and enslaved their wives or girls. It’s definitely a big shock.”*

This stark contradiction between the deeply rooted traditions of shared kinship, and the betrayal experienced in 2014, remains a source of significant trauma and suspicion among the Yazidi community. Furthermore, many of the Yazidis we interviewed feel almost as betrayed by the Peshmerga, the Kurdish military in northern Iraq, accusing them of not offering them adequate protection from the violent IS attacks.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with Alannah Travers, a British-German journalist focused on Iraq and engaged with the Coalition for Just Reparations.

<sup>10</sup> Zmkan Saleem and Renad Mansour, “Responding to instability in Iraq’s Sinjar district,” Chatham House, XCEPT Research Paper, 15 May 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/responding-instability-iraqs-sinjar-district/03-sinjar-transnational-conflict-hub>, accessed 12 June 2024.

### **3. Cross-generational memories, ranging from systemic repression to recent betrayals by Sunni Arab neighbours, significantly shape the Yezidis' mistrust and scepticism about the effectiveness of peace and reconciliation interventions.**

Despite identifying as a peace-loving community that does not prioritise revenge, many Yezidis grapple with a profound mistrust of multiple reconciliation attempts aimed at repairing the fractured social fabric since 2014.<sup>11</sup> This mistrust is exacerbated by the perceived absence of heartfelt recognition and sincere apologies on behalf of some of their Muslim compatriots for the injustices inflicted upon them. They also resent the failure of local people to acknowledge that from the perspective of many Yezidis, the IS genocide – severe as it may be – is merely an additional layer of persecution atop a history marked by systemic injustices and repressive practices against the Yezidi people.

In interviews with the author, some Yezidis highlight the reluctance of some of their Muslim compatriots to confront the role of Islamist propaganda and to acknowledge how certain interpretations of Islamic writings have played a role in the demonisation of the Yezidi community. Many interviewees attribute this reluctance to a defensive attitude towards Islam and an unwillingness to engage with the controversial question of why extremist groups have been able to instrumentalise Islam to justify their radical rhetoric and violent practices.

Moreover, despite widespread condemnation of the IS genocide by the Iraqi public and Iraqi officials, Yezidis note that many Muslim Iraqis still harbour suspicions towards the Yezidi religion and culture. As one interviewee explained, there have been incidents where Muslim Iraqis have politely refused to share meals with Yezidis due to unfounded fears of impurity, even after participating in ostensibly inclusive TV shows together. These incidents serve to deepen personal and inherited memories of discrimination and stigmatisation.

These experiences lead some Yezidis to question the effectiveness of what they perceive to be cosmetic attempts at dialogue with other communities and cast doubt on whether such initiatives can genuinely foster understanding of their longstanding plight. The skepticism persists, driven by the belief that their struggles precede the atrocities inflicted since 2014 and that true empathy and awareness remain elusive among fellow Iraqis. Many interviewees expressed strong doubts about whether a round of dialogues can profoundly change the attitudes of their compatriots. Some were skeptical about the true agendas underlying many of the ongoing reconciliation initiatives.

## **Policy implications**

### **1. Rebuilding Yezidi trust and forging genuine connections between communities will require acknowledgment of historical injustices and a commitment by the Iraqi government and religious authorities to counter deeply ingrained prejudices.**

In the aftermath of IS terror, Yezidi communities continue to grapple with the profound consequences of persecution and displacement.<sup>12</sup>

The road to recovery for the Yezidis in Nineveh remains fraught with challenges, as they strive to rebuild their lives, preserve their cultural heritage,

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<sup>11</sup> As well as structural reasons preventing the return of many Yezidi children from Syria, such as lack of identity papers or official registration, it is important to acknowledge that many Yezidis still do not embrace the return of these children born out of rape, and often argue that all accused IS fighters should be executed, even if the evidence of their crimes is questionable or the result of torture in the context of Iraq's highly problematic judicial system. Expert interview with Alannah Travers, 20 March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Alannah Travers, 'Nine years after the Yezidi genocide, what's next for survivors?', Al Jazeera, 3 August 2023, <https://aje.io/61j4qv>, accessed 21 May 2024.

and secure a sustainable future in the face of ongoing adversities. Recognition and justice is central to progress in this struggle.

The Iraqi government and wider public have acknowledged and condemned the genocide committed by IS against the Yazidis. However, until there is also genuine acknowledgment of historical injustices and betrayal of trust by their non-Yezidi compatriots, many Yazidis find themselves unable to move beyond this rupture and reestablish the pre-IS state of fraternity and trust. Rebuilding these fractured relationships and forging genuine connections will hinge on a comprehensive reckoning with the profound sense of betrayal that has permeated the Yazidi community and has been

compounded by recurrent hate speech crimes directed at Yazidis by the Muslim majority, including the revival of the ‘devil worshipper’ trope.<sup>13</sup>

The government and religious authorities both have important roles to play in demonstrating recognition of Yazidi persecution and countering prejudice. It is also vital to tap into the goodwill emanating from Iraq’s highest Shi’a religious authority, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani’s *marj’iyya* in Najaf.<sup>14</sup> For instance, after meeting with a delegation of Yazidis in 2016, al-Sistani is quoted as saying: “The Yazidis are our responsibility”.<sup>15</sup> Other major Shi’a and Sunni clerics in Iraq, too, could do much to help destigmatise Yazidis – for example by challenging and dispelling religious propaganda that labels Yazidis as devil worshippers.

## **2. Facilitated discussions within different communities about contentious historical events can help mitigate re-traumatisation and avoid spurring new tensions between groups. Locally led, inter-group dialogue structured around shared interests has been effective in spurring constructive engagement.**

Conflict management practitioners working in the region stress that dialogues need to start within Yazidi and Arab communities separately to begin with, to put them in a better position to have constructive engagements with other groups once brought together. For example, facilitators have delicately endeavoured to contribute to inter-communal healing by involving members of Yazidi communities in an internal, gradual dialogue process designed to shift their perspectives and contextualise their instinctive attributions of guilt, moving away from broad generalisations.<sup>16</sup>

According to dialogue facilitators interviewed by the author, Yazidi participants initially attributed guilt in more generalised terms, referring to “Arab tribes who kidnapped and killed their daughters and sons”. However, after several sessions, a natural evolution occurred, with participants adopting more nuanced formulations such as, “some bad individuals from certain Arab tribes attacked our daughters and sons.”

Recognising the ongoing sensitivity of these wounds, facilitators emphasise the need to avoid re-traumatising participants from victim and survivor communities. They invest time in preparing the ground by conducting separate sessions with each

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13 Frankie Vetch, ‘Hate speech sparks fears of violence against Yazidis in Iraq’, Coda Story, 18 May 2023, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/information-war/yazidi-hate-speech-iraq/>, accessed 21 May 2024.

14 Caroleen Sayej, ‘Ayatollah Sistani: Much More than a “Guide” for Iraqis’, POMEPS Studies 35: Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq, October 2019, <https://pomeps.org/ayatollah-sistani-much-more-than-a-guide-for-iraqis/>; Shafaq News, ‘Iraq’s religious leaders join hands to promote peaceful coexistence’, 26 March 2019, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/iraq-s-religious-leaders-join-hands-to-promote-peaceful-coexistence>, accessed 21 May 2024.

15 The World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, “Delegation of Yazidis Meet Ayatullah Sistani,” <https://archive.world-federation.org/news/delegation-Yezidis-meet-ayatullah-sistani>, accessed 13 March 2024.

16 Author’s interviews with Iraqi peace-building practitioners from Tahreer Organisation and the Iraqi Centre for Negotiation Skills and Conflict Management (IQCM), April and May 2023.



party to the conflict (Yezidis as well as members of Arab tribes), before bringing them together. Even when members of these distinct communities come face-to-face, the facilitators and process designers prefer to structure the conversation around practical

topics of mutual interest or concern, such as cooperation and collaboration to address shared grievances like water or electricity shortages, or the broader issues of healthcare and welfare services.

### **3. The Yezidi Survivors Law was an important step towards transitional justice – but the credibility of justice and reconciliation efforts hinges on greater accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in its implementation.**

Adopted by the Iraqi parliament on 1 March 2021, the Yezidi [Female] Survivors Law<sup>17</sup> constitutes a remarkable example of Iraqi legislation devised internally rather than imposed by international actors and designed specifically to provide reparations and pave the path to transitional justice. Ensuring its full implementation remains of utmost importance in addressing the current scepticism among Yezidis regarding the credibility of reconciliation efforts.

However, there is a lag in the process to provide material and psychological compensation for the victims of IS. Many of the Yezidis we interviewed pointed out that they still await a form of adequate material compensation for the damages inflicted by IS and lack the means to rebuild their houses in Sinjar. Moreover, during the XCEPT fieldwork in Sinjar, many interviewees did not associate feelings of homeland with the larger federal state but rather with the Mount Sinjar, viewing the state as more of a tyrant than a protector or benefactor.

Greater diplomatic and aid community pressure could be exerted on the Iraqi government to expedite claims processes and identify and address any gaps in the supply chain.<sup>18</sup> Although the Iraqi government has made substantial progress in the area of salaries distributions, efforts to expedite the delivery of housing and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) remain hindered by a complex web of communication breakdowns,

bureaucratic hurdles, political inertia, and corruption.<sup>19</sup>

Enhancing coordination among various state agencies is key to progress. These include the General Directorate for Survivors' Affairs (GDSA) along with the committee responsible for reviewing applications and deciding on appeals. A streamlined and efficient process is crucial to ensure that survivors receive the financial support they are entitled to without unnecessary delays or corrupt practices.

For instance, a report by the Coalition for Just Reparations (C4JR) – an alliance of Iraqi CSOs calling for comprehensive reparations for survivors of atrocity crimes perpetrated during the ISIL conflict in Iraq – highlights that the requirement to submit official investigation documents continues to prevent many survivors from achieving their rights through a successful application process under the Yezidi [Female] Survivors Law (YSL).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, more progress must be made in terms of providing victims with adequate medical and psychological care, as well as raising awareness about mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and improving access to treatment options.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the Iraqi government could proactively engage with and involve locally led civil society organisations. Collaborating with these entities can

17 Coalition for Just Reparations, 'YEZIDI SURVIVORS' LAW (YSL)', <https://c4jr.org/ysl>, accessed 10 March 2024.

18 Coalition for Just Reparations, 'More than "Ink on Paper:" Taking Stock Two Years after the Adoption of the Yezidi [Female-Survivors Law]', 1 March 2023, <https://c4jr.org/0103202327059>, accessed 21 May 2024.

19 Coalition for Just Reparations, 'More than "Ink on Paper:"

20 Coalition for Just Reparations, 'More than "Ink on Paper:"

21 Perjan Hashim Taha, Nezar Ismet Taib, and Hushyar Musa Sulaiman, 'Posttraumatic stress disorder correlates among internally displaced Yezidi population following Islamic state of Iraq and Syria attacks in Iraq', *BMC Psychiatry* 21, 290 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03299-8>, accessed 21 May 2024.

help bridge the gap between the government and disenfranchised communities in Sinjar, where grievances have persisted due to a perceived lack of attention from Iraqi authorities. Fostering an environment where local organisations can actively participate in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts can contribute to a more effective and inclusive recovery process that considers the unique challenges faced by the Yezidi population in rebuilding their lives after the horrors inflicted by IS.

Previous sections have stressed the need for Iraqi authorities and the wider public to acknowledge IS atrocities as another chapter in a long history of Yezidi persecution. Another important precondition for the emotional recovery of survivors and restoration of trust in the Iraqi justice is the adoption of adequate legislation to hold members of IS to account and to facilitate the participation of survivors and their families in formal criminal proceedings.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Societal discrimination against Yezidis remains rooted in ignorance and misunderstandings about Yezidi culture and beliefs. Revising school curricula and organising cultural exchanges could help forge understanding between communities.**

Previous sections noted the important role of religious authorities in countering the stigmatisation of Yezidis as ‘devil worshippers.’ Likewise, Iraq’s international partners and government agencies could do much to raise awareness and promote understanding of Yezidi culture and religion, dispelling myths and suspicions. The involvement of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture is crucial, leading with a structural revision of portrayals of Yezidi culture in Iraqi schoolbooks.<sup>23</sup> According to interviewees, history and social geography curricula in particular do not sufficiently or appropriately tackle de-stigmatisation of the Yezidi community.<sup>24</sup>

Iraqi domestic tourism may also offer a unique avenue for promoting cultural exchange and developing shared pride in Iraq’s multicultural heritage.<sup>25</sup> State-funded or internationally supported trips for non-Yezidi Iraqi schoolchildren and adolescents to Yezidi temples in Lalish, as well as organised journeys for Yezidis to other significant Iraqi cultural centres (e.g., the marshes, the holy shrines in Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra, Mosul, Hatra, and the historical ruins of Babylon) could promote greater appreciation of and pride in shared Iraqi cultural heritage. Dual-narrative tours across Sinjar, enriched with moderated rounds of reconciliatory dialogue, could prove an innovative method to convey both Yezidi and Arab

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22 Coalition for Just Reparations, ‘Position Paper on an ISIL Accountability Mechanism in Iraq’, August 2022, [https://www.justice-iraq.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Final-position-paper-ISIL-mechanism-ENG\\_FINAL\\_Hyperlink-sk-1-2.pdf](https://www.justice-iraq.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Final-position-paper-ISIL-mechanism-ENG_FINAL_Hyperlink-sk-1-2.pdf), accessed 21 May 2024.

23 Joshua Levkowitz and Salah Abdulrahman, ‘In Iraq, Advocates Aim to Reform Education to Build Collective Identity’, United States Institute of Peace, 16 February 2021, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2021/02/iraq-advocates-aim-reform-education-build-collective-identity>; Zeri Khairi Gadi, ‘10: Embracing Emotion and Building Confidence: Using Participatory Methods with Yezidi Women in Iraq’, in Jo Howard and Mariz Tadros, eds., *Using Participatory Methods to Explore Freedom of Religion and Belief* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023). Retrieved Mar 18, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529229295.ch010>.

24 Edip Gölbaşı, ‘The Yezidis and the Ottoman State: Modern power, military conscription, and conversion policies, 1830-1909’, MS thesis, Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 2008; Allison, Christine. ‘“Unbelievable slowness of mind”: Yezidi studies, from nineteenth to twenty-first century’, *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2008): 1-23; Usman, Shakir Muhammad, ‘Yezidis: A Tale of a Lost, Found, and Misunderstood Legacy in the Light of Mimetic Theory’, *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 28.1 (2021): 251-280; Ali, Majid Hassan, ‘The identity controversy of religious minorities in Iraq: the crystallization of the Yezidi identity after 2003’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47.5 (2020): 811-831.

25 Craig Larkin and Inna Rudolf, ‘Iraqi heritage restoration, grassroots interventions and post-conflict recovery: reflections from Mosul’, *Journal of Social Archeology*, December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14696053231220908>, accessed 21 May 2024.



perspectives and facilitate mutual understanding about each other's sense of victimhood.<sup>26</sup>

Paving the way for a more inclusive society where the Yezidi community is not only recognised and

respected, but also feels integrated and engaged in Iraq's post-2014 state building project, will require addressing the roots of discrimination through multifaceted initiatives.

## **5. The contentious Sinjar Agreement leaves Yezidi residents caught in tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the federal government, and myriad paramilitaries, with little influence on the fate of their homeland.<sup>27</sup>**

Numerous Yezidis interviewed for this paper expressed a sense that they were not sufficiently consulted about decisions regarding their future. This is particularly the case for those who have endured displacement or spent years in refugee camps. Faced with the choice of staying in dire camp conditions or returning to Sinjar with minimal support for rebuilding their homes, Yezidis find themselves grappling with the preservation of dignity while living in tents. Although some resilient Yezidis have taken the initiative to rebuild in the still heavily damaged Sinjar area, others opt for any opportunity to migrate.

The Sinjar security and stability agreement, signed in October 2020 by the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), aimed to promote reconciliation through administrative changes and security and reconstruction provisions.<sup>28</sup> However, with minimal consultation with Sinjar's local communities, the agreement offers little to recognise the Yezidis' feelings of insecurity and lingering sensations of betrayal by Kurdish forces, whom they believe

failed to adequately shield them from IS. Some interviewees even suggested that the presence of an international peacekeeping force would instill a greater sense of safety than the multitude of armed state and non-state actors currently roaming and targeting the Sinjar region.

Even though Yezidis may not be specifically targeted by these vaguely state-aligned paramilitaries, the fragmentation of the security landscape around their areas does not help restore Yezidi trust in the Iraqi Armed Forces. On the contrary, in the absence of a reevaluation of the Sinjar Agreement, Yezidis often find themselves compelled to seek out reliable patrons who can improve their survival chances against the background of myriad militant groups roaming across Sinjar. These include Kurdish separatist groups, as well as Iranian or Turkish-backed militias.

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26 Emily Schneider, 'Touring for peace: the role of dual-narrative tours in creating transnational activists', *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, June 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJTC-12-2017-0092>, accessed 21 May 2024.

27 Hanar Marouf, 'The Sinjar agreement has good ideas, but is it a dead end?', *Atlantic Council*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-sinjar-agreement-has-good-ideas-but-is-it-a-dead-end/>, accessed 12 June 2024.

28 International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar," 31 May 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-stabilising-contested-district-sinjar>, accessed 12 June 2024.

## 6. With continuing insecurity and few structures in place to support reintegration in Sinjar, there is a perceived hypocrisy to European calls for Yezidis to return.

European governments increasingly are declining Yezidi refugee petitions.<sup>29</sup> However, in addition to problems with the implementation of compensation schemes (cf. above) and little support for economic and social reintegration, the Sinjar region continues to suffer a lack of security, including tensions and violent escalations among regional actors, proxies, and militia powers.<sup>30</sup> Drone strikes such as those by the Turkish government pursuing PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) locations, have inadvertently caused casualties among Yezidi civilians.<sup>31</sup> Such incidents, compounded by international calls to return, contribute significantly to the Yezidis' feelings of insecurity and abandonment.

The Iraqi government plans to close all internally displaced people (IDP) camps for displaced Yezidis by the end of July 2024.<sup>32</sup> This threatens to force out approximately 130,000 Yezidi IDPs from their makeshift shelters. The prevailing sense of alienation toward the state, coupled with its apparent incapacity and reluctance to implement robust reintegration strategies, could further impede the long-term return of Yezidis to their areas of origin.<sup>33</sup>

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29 Sou-Jie van Brunnersum, 'Yezidi refugee fears deportation after three years in Germany', InfoMigrants, 1 January 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/54214/Yezidi-refugee-fears-deportation-after-three-years-in-germany>, accessed 21 May 2024.

30 Zmkan Saleem and Renad Mansour, 'Responding to instability in Iraq's Sinjar district', XCEPT Chatham House Research Paper, 21 March 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/responding-instability-iraqs-sinjar-district>, accessed 21 May 2024.

31 Dana Taib Menmy, 'Yezidi child killed in Turkish airstrike in Sinjar, 7 others wounded', The New Arab, 16 June 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/news/yazidi-child-killed-turkish-airstrike-sinjar>, accessed 21 May 2024.

32 Rudaw, 'Iraq to stop all aid to IDP camps July 30', 17 March 2024, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/170320242>, accessed 21 May 2024.

33 Rudaw, 'Iraq to stop all aid to IDP camps July 30'.

## About the author

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## About XCEPT

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